



# NEWS RELEASE

## UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

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### THE BERLIN AIRLIFT -- THE AIR FORCE'S FIRST VICTORY

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**KIRTLAND AIR FORCE BASE, N.M.** – Forty-eight years ago, a very young United States Air Force won its first victory in what would become known as the Cold War.

The World War Two alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union had been one of mutual interest. Those interests changed once the last German military unit put down its weapons. By 1947, Great Britain and the United States had serious concerns about the Soviets' plans and actions in Europe. Winston Churchill, the former British Prime Minister, warned about an "iron curtain" dividing the continent.

By 1948, Germany was once again center stage in the world – a stage for the rivalry of the Cold War. The country had been divided into four zones of occupation following World War II. West Germany contained the former British, French and American zones, while the Soviets had created a puppet state known as East Germany. Berlin, the German capital, had also been divided among the Allies. The city, however, lay deep inside what was now Soviet-controlled East Germany. This unusual arrangement produced the first major conflict between the Soviets and the West.

On June 24, 1948, Soviet officials stopped traffic in or out of West Berlin. The announced cause was "technical problems." In reality, Soviet premier Joseph Stalin was testing the will of the West. Would his former allies fight him over the very country they had just worked to defeat? The British, French and Americans were cautious. Forcing their way through the Soviet blockade on the ground would almost certainly lead to another major war. None, however, were willing to just abandon West Berlin to the Soviets.

The answer was to be found in the new United States Air Force. Within hours of the start of the blockade, U.S. General Lucius Clay proposed to keep the city supplied by air. When the Allies had divided

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the country, three air routes to Berlin had been set up through East Germany. The Allies could not break through on the ground without a war, but neither could the Soviets stop air traffic without a fight.

A battle of will began. The U.S. Air Force brought in as many C-47 cargo planes as it could possibly spare, and “Operation Vittles” began. The British Royal Air Force joined the effort. Two days after the blockade began, the first planes landed in West Berlin. The Air Force calculated that 4500 tons of supplies per day would have to be brought in, to keep the city’s 2.5 million residents supplied with just the bare necessities.

The initial flights into the city delivered far fewer supplies than were needed, but the airlift effort grew at an explosive rate. By September of 1948, cargo planes landed in West Berlin at a rate of one every three minutes. The people of West Berlin were comforted by the constant sound of engines. The noise reminded them that they were not forgotten.

The trip from West Germany to Berlin was not without danger. The Soviets never actually attacked any aircraft, but they found creative ways to harass the crews. They jammed radio signals to attempt to force the planes off course. Large barrage balloons were allowed to drift into the air corridors. Enemy fighters “buzzed” the slow cargo planes.

Despite these obstacles, the Air Force kept the airlift going, month after month. Combat airpower had come of age in World War II. During the Berlin Airlift, military airlift reached maturity. New techniques in air traffic control, maintenance, and cargo loading were developed to support the effort. When two airports proved inadequate for the effort, the people of Berlin joined together to quickly build a third, Tegel Airport, two months ahead of schedule. By April 16, 1949, the operation was so well-established that the “Easter Parade” that day alone delivered enough coal to fill 600 railroad cars.

After 11 tense months, Stalin quit. Realizing that the allies were fully committed to prevent the fall of the city, he lifted the blockade on May 12, 1949. More than two million tons of supplies had flown over the Soviets, and into West Berlin. The effort had not been without cost. Sixty-five Americans, Germans and British had lost their lives.

The first “battle” of the Cold War, though, had been won by the West. The skill, courage and commitment of the airmen and thousands of support personnel won the praise of the people of Berlin.

The Germans were no longer enemies. The mayor of Berlin, Ernst Reuter, noted the new relationship after the crisis was over:

“You have come to us no longer as enemies but as friends. Americans, remember the airlift as the bridge that joined us as kindred nations, prepared to stand firm in defiance of tyranny, prepared to endure hardship in defense of liberty.”